

THE MISSING PIECE: JESSE VENTURA, INTERACTIVE CAMPAIGNING
AND THE LAUNCH OF POLITICAL CYBERSPACE

by

Amy Yag

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History

The University of Utah

May 2011

Copyright © Amy Yag 2011

All Rights Reserved

The University of Utah Graduate School

STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

The thesis of Amy Yag
has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

Robert A. Goldberg, Chair 12/10/2010
Date Approved

L. Ray Gunn, Member 12/10/2010
Date Approved

Marouf Hasian, Member 12/13/2010
Date Approved

and by James Lehning, Chair of
the Department of History

and by Charles A. Wight, Dean of The Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

The history of Internet based political campaigning in the United States underestimates the influence of wrestler turned politician Jesse Ventura. This thesis shows how Jesse Ventura's campaign helped shape twenty-first-century Internet politics, examining details of the gubernatorial candidate's message and techniques. Beginning with the Internet's influence on the elections of 1994 and 1996, this research shows that the introductory age of political Internet technology reached new heights with Jesse Ventura's unprecedented use of the medium. The story of techno-political fusion reveals an American political system always evolving and adapting in an ever-changing environment.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
Chapter	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 HISTORIOGRAPHY OF INTERNET CAMPAIGNING.....	5
3 JESSE VENTURA’S INTERNET UNDERTAKING.....	9
4 CONCLUSION.....	37
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	38

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Wilson Carey McWilliams, in his book *The Politics of Disappointment?: American Elections, 1980-1998*, best captured a defining moment of late twentieth-century politics. He wrote: “In 1996 money was politically omnipresent, and very few voters did not at least sense that mass politics, while democratic in form, is more and more oligarchic in content.”¹ Labor intensive campaign tactics such as whistle stop speaking tours, handshaking photo-ops, and get out the vote drives, supplemented by expensive television and radio ads, attempted to mobilize voters and attracted media attention. Yet, as the costs of campaigning dramatically increased, political operatives were dismayed as participation decreased. The 1996 Presidential election brought voters to the polls in record low numbers, as only 54 percent of the eligible electorate cast ballots.²

¹ Wilson Carey McWilliams, *Beyond the Politics of Disappointment?: American Elections, 1980-1998* (New York: Chatham House Publishers Seven Bridges Press, 2000), 103.

² Bureau of the Census, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*, prepared by U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p20-542.pdf, 2002. Accessed 24 August 2010.

Pundits lamented this failure of democracy. Declining participation in voluntary groups, the loss of public faith and trust in political parties and governing institutions, the rise of PACs, and the shrinking role of labor union organizations all contributed to diminished political activism. Some looked beyond voting percentages to a more fundamental problem. Sarah Sobieraj and Deborah White's study of political involvement found, "it is not the generic act of participation that supports political life but rather the opportunity to engage with politics that serves as an impetus for political activity."³ Sobieraj and White contend that political activism must go beyond monetary donations and membership in conscience constituencies. Voters had to be less passive, and develop a more personal involvement with politics.⁴

Seeking to overcome voter apathy at reasonable cost, political operatives moved to take advantage of new technologies that promised to reinvigorate the democratic process. Internet use among adults in the United States grew exponentially between 1996 and 2000, and its networking of American society quickly captured the attention of political activists. The Internet presented politicians with an opportunity to reach voters inexpensively and frequently with messages that both elicited voter support and drew financial donations. Beyond this, with the click of a mouse voters could more intensely engage the political process by volunteering for campaign duties and finding community

³ Sarah Sobieraj and Deborah White, "Taxing Political Life: Reevaluating the Relationship Between Voluntary Association Membership, Political Engagement and the State," *The Sociological Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (Autumn, 2004): 739.

⁴ For a general description of American politics see: Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992); Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); Philip Dine, *State of the Unions: How Labor can Strengthen the Middle Class, Improve Our Economy, and Regain Political Influence* (New York: McGraw Hill Publishing, 2007).

with the like-minded. As computers played an increasing role in campaigns, scholars took notice and studied this techno-political fusion. In particular, political scientists and communication scholars considered the Internet's emergence in politics in the 1990s. Most sought to identify the groups that utilized on-line information, the influence of early mobilizing websites such as Meetup.com and Moveon.org, and the difference between online and traditional campaign strategies. The literature fixes the revolution of Internet politics in the 2004 Presidential election, when large-scale interactive sites became significant. Many commentators focused on Governor Howard Dean's run for the Presidency in 2004 to signal the emergence of Internet politics that interacted with and engaged voters. By then, earlier pamphlet-like sites that only conveyed information had been replaced.⁵

But there is a more crucial genesis of change. To be at the creation of Internet campaigning that allowed voters to interact with digital technology, is to return to 1998 and study the innovative campaign of former wrestler and movie actor Jesse Ventura and understand how his operatives grafted technology to politics. Ventura's campaign combined the basic online candidate platform introduced during the elections of 1994 and 1996 with one of the earliest efforts to mobilize voters with interactive web activity. Its success proved crucial to the achievement of his underdog victory as Minnesota

⁵ For further information see: Paul S. Herrnson, Atiya Kai Stokes-Brown, and Matthew Hindman, "Campaign Politics and the Digital Divide: Constituency Characteristics, Strategic Considerations, and Candidate Internet Use in State Legislative Elections," *Political Research Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (March, 2007): 31-42; Philip N. Howard, "Deep Democracy, Thin Citizenship: The Impact of Digital Media in Political Campaign Strategy," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 597, no. 1 (2005): 153-170; Samuel J. Best and Brian S. Krueger, "Analyzing the Representativeness of Internet Political Participation," *Political Behavior* 27, no. 2 (June, 2005): 183-216.

governor. Beginning with the Ventura campaign, the evolutionary cyber path to the Dean effort and beyond is distinct and unmistakable. This thesis seeks to explore the origins of Internet campaigning as a means to mobilize people and foster political engagement while tracking the evolution of Internet based politics.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF INTERNET CAMPAIGNING

One of the first studies of political Internet use was Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis' *Campaigning Online: The Internet in U.S. Elections*. This book considered strategies used by politicians and campaign managers to choose the material and style best suited for Internet advertisements. Bimber and Davis, focusing on the 2000 Presidential campaign, contrasted candidates' online messages with the content presented in traditional media forms. The authors argued that websites supplemented traditional campaign techniques rather than replaced them, and had a greater influence on partisans than undecided voters. Compared to mass media advertisements that captured viewer attention when they appeared on television, radio, and in newspapers, online initiatives were limited in their ability to hold and direct the public. They concluded: "The Internet cannot at present do what television and newspapers can: saturate a large audience with messages that interrupt citizens' focus and direct it toward the campaign and, more specifically, a candidate's message."⁶

In Mousepads, Shoe Leather, and Hope: Lessons from the Howard Dean Campaign for the Future of Internet Politics, Zephyr Teachout and Thomas Streeter

⁶ Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis, *Campaigning Online: The Internet in U.S. Elections* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 147.

worked with members of Howard Dean's 2004 campaign to present a multifaceted account of its Internet use. The authors followed campaign workers in the years before the election to gauge how their diverse backgrounds and knowledge of the Internet merged to create a comprehensive online initiative. Jerome Armstrong's political blog 'MyDD' rallied support for Dean on the Internet in 2002 and led to his collaboration with Dean's campaign directors to integrate online efforts. Bobby Clark, the campaign's web strategist, created an early web page using images from TV's popular drama *West Wing*, that sparked viewers' interest. In an informative interview, Dean admitted that online communities looking for political change found him, and that he realized the potential of Internet campaigning when he was introduced to Meetup.com. The website connected voters, who had already embraced Internet technology, in mobilizing forums that stimulated commitment. Dean's national Meetup Director Michael Silberman created over 1,000 local chapters of supporters that spread the word about Dean's campaign, embodying the cyber revival of word-of-mouth politics. One of the most in-depth examinations of Howard Dean's Internet use in 2004, *Mousepads, Shoe Leather, and Hope* impressed readers with details of Dean's success, but offered no sense of its progenitors. While the authors acknowledged that the birth of Internet politics predated the 2004 election, they resisted backtracking and contended that the Dean campaign revolutionized voter mobilization and initiated a political transformation.⁷

When Jesse Ventura comes into focus it is usually in a minor role in studies of third-party politics. Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich, and David W. Ronde's *Change*

⁷ Zephyr Teachout and Thomas Streeter, et al., *Mousepads, Shoe Leather, and Hope: Lessons from the Howard Dean Campaign for the Future of Internet Politics* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 8.

and Continuity in the 1996 and 1998 Elections examined the revival of third parties in the United States. Focusing on Bill Clinton's move toward the political center and Ross Perot's success, they offered a general breakdown of the American party system, chronicling successful third-party candidates who embodied new political trends. The ex-wrestler is mentioned once in an informational aside: "Jesse Ventura was elected governor of Minnesota in a three-way contest in which he gained 37 percent of the vote."⁸

Political scientists Dean Lacy and Quin Monson gave Ventura more attention. They used Ventura's run for governor as a case study to determine the characteristics of voters who endorsed third-party candidates. To track voter trends, Lacy and Monson compared Ventura's support with that of his opponents. They found that Ventura's candidacy attracted new voters and that his support consisted primarily of young men, with liberal views, and less than college-level educations. The authors credited Ventura's victory to his celebrity status, public speaking experience, and ability to bypass the primaries. According to Lacy and Monson, "third-party appeals are growing as moderate candidates squeeze into elections between the social conservatism of Republicans and the

⁸ Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich and David W. Ronde, *Change and Continuity in the 1996 and 1998 Elections* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1999), 289-290. In 1992 one of every five voters supported Perot. In 1996 one in ten voters supported either Perot, or representatives of other minor-parties. Discussed candidates include Theodore Roosevelt in 1912, Robert M. LaFollette in 1924, J. Strom Thurmond in 1948, George Wallace in 1968, and John B. Anderson in 1980.

economic liberalism of Democrats.”⁹ Curiously, the authors make no mention of Ventura’s Internet campaign.¹⁰

Stephen I. Frank and Steven C. Wagner’s *“We Shocked the World!”: A Case Study of Jesse Ventura’s Election as Governor of Minnesota* and Tom Hauser’s *Inside the Ropes with Jesse Ventura*, looked closely at Ventura’s run for governor. Frank and Wagner, political scientists at St. Cloud State University, focused on campaign strategy, voter profiles, and candidate images. Relying primarily on newspapers and election polls, they offer a traditional account with only a brief glance at the Internet’s role in the campaign. Tom Hauser, a reporter for KSTP-TV in Minneapolis, traveled with Ventura as candidate and later governor. This inside take also underestimated the Internet’s impact on the campaign.¹¹

The Ventura campaign demands another look. To see a key moment in the beginning of Internet based politics, more light must be shed on Ventura and the change embraced by his campaign. His use of emerging technology during a transitional period was the catalyst that facilitated the evolution of conventional politics toward the advanced online campaigning that defined the elections of 2000, 2004, and 2008.

⁹ Dean Lacy and Quin Monson, “The Origins and Impact of Votes for Third-Party Candidates: A Case Study of the 1998 Minnesota Gubernatorial Election,” *Political Research Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (June, 2002): 429.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Stephen I. Frank and Steven C. Wagner, *“We Shocked the World!”: A Case Study of Jesse Ventura’s Election as Governor of Minnesota* (New York: Harcourt College Publishers, 1999); Tom Hauser, *Inside the Ropes with Jesse Ventura* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

CHAPTER 3

JESSE VENTURA'S INTERNET UNDERTAKING

The earliest use of the Internet in politics changed the way voters interacted with candidates and engaged the electoral process. Graeme Browning, in his work *Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Influence American Politics*, argued, “The Internet has been evolving in a linear fashion, from point to point, since the 1960s, but on October 18, 1994, it took an abrupt turn straight toward the soul of this nation.”¹² On that day the Minnesota Electronic Democracy Project, an Internet savvy group studying emerging technology at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs in Minneapolis, announced that it would host and moderate an online debate between U.S. Senate candidates Rod Grams and Ann Wynn. The group used LISTSERV technology to create an e-mail based discussion forum. For many, the debate presented an opportunity to be involved in what experts considered an imminent transformation of the political process. The Minnesota E-Democracy debates attracted approximately one thousand people who

¹² Graeme Browning and Daniel J. Weitzner, eds., *Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Influence American Politics* (Medford: CyberAge Books, 1996), 1.

“‘listened’ via the Internet as Grams and Wynia argued over crime, federal regulations, and re-establishing the link between Americans and their government.”¹³

Viewers used the moderated discussion forum to comment on the candidates and the remarks made by other “listeners.” Hypermail enabled the e-mail based LISTSERV discussion to be posted on the MN EDemocracy website, via its host site, Twin Cities Freenet. As a result, these candidates engaged in the first globally accessible political discussions. Debate moderator G. Scott Aikens announced that listeners had participated in a unique experiment.

For the first time since President Franklin D. Roosevelt inaugurated his “fireside chats” on the radio in 1943 and John F Kennedy and Richard Nixon argued over the issues on the first televised debate in 1960, American voters engaged in a wholly new medium of communication with the potential to influence not only the course, but the very essence of national politics.¹⁴

What the candidates actually said is not important. Rather, the legacy of the 1994 election remained in its online advances. The comments posted to the World Wide Web were read and responded to in discussion forums, engaged voters, and initiated political action.¹⁵

Bill Clinton and Bob Dole both established an Internet presence during the Presidential election of 1996. At that time, forty million Americans had access to the Internet and exit polls showed that 26 percent of voters were regular Internet users. During the campaign the candidates mentioned their websites in brochures, on the air

¹³ Ibid., 2; G. Scott Aikens, “A History of Minnesota Electronic Democracy 1994,” *First Monday: Peer Reviewed Journal on the Internet* 1 no. 5 (November 1996).

¹⁴ Browning and Weitzner, eds., *Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Influence American Politics*, 1-2.

¹⁵ Aikens, “A History of Minnesota Electronic Democracy 1994.”; Browning and Weitzner, eds., *Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Influence American Politics*, 1-2.

during advertisements, and in speeches. Bob Dole even gave his campaign Uniform Resource Locator (URL) on national television during the second Presidential debate.¹⁶

On July 10, 1996 Vice President Al Gore spoke at the official unveiling of the Clinton/Gore website. Its homepage featured photographs of the President and Vice-President and provided viewers with links to information about Clinton's accomplishments. A secondary page titled "Meeting America's Challenges" had a copy of Clinton's State of the Union Address, alongside details of his economic plan, student loan legislation, environmental policies, and the assault weapons ban. Clinton's interest in technology contributed to his campaign's Internet use. At the website's reveal, Gore declared that Clinton worked "tirelessly to insure that America forges ahead and leads the world in the information age. He has brought technology into our classrooms and libraries, he signed the historic telecommunications reform bill to make sure that all of our cabinet agencies are online."¹⁷ Their site enabled viewers to click their mice and be transported to links that provided candidate information. However, besides the news ticker that updated along the bottom of their site and changing photographs, its ability to interact with voters was limited. The page only provided information that complemented traditional campaign efforts.¹⁸

Bob Dole's site offered viewers more interaction with advanced technology. Viewers entered Dole's site and its appearance changed to complement each user's

¹⁶ Browning and Weitzner, eds., *Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Influence American Politics*, 1-2.

¹⁷ Press Release "Remarks by Vice-President Al Gore at the Unveiling of the Clinton/Gore '96 website," July 10, 1996, <http://www.4President.us/websites/1996/cliintongore1996website.html>. Accessed 24 September 2010.

¹⁸ Ibid.

interests, home state, and searches from previous visits. The custom page allowed viewers to design campaign buttons, download wallpaper for their desktops, send e-mail cards, create campaign posters, and test their knowledge of Dole's political career with trivia and puzzles. Dole's site was designed to engage and attract voters with a flair. These details kept viewers on site as long as possible and maximized the information they obtained.¹⁹

The 1996 election saw advances in candidate website content and style. Election updates on a running ticker and sites adapting to complement viewers' individual tastes and locations showed an evolving techno-politics. However, the public's lack of readily available Internet access, understanding of its growing potential, and interest in its communicative power limited the technology's ability to influence the campaign process. An AT&T opinion poll conducted in 1996 reported that of the forty million Americans using the Internet, 65 percent wanted to obtain candidates' positions, but only 24 percent accessed candidate sites during the 1996 election.²⁰

The utilization of technology to engage voters through Internet based communication with candidates had begun, but it was the technologies that emerged following the 1996 Presidential election that allowed the new medium's political influence to grow exponentially. Initially, computers had two specific functions: to enable users access to basic word processing systems and spreadsheets and to provide consumers with the ability to navigate cyberspace. Innovations coming online allowed

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ William L. Benoit and Pamela J. Benoit, "The Virtual Campaign: Presidential Primary Websites in Campaign 2000," www.acjournal.org/holdings/v013/1553/rogue4/benoit.html, Accessed 24 September 2010.

users simultaneous access to both capabilities. Internet corporations combined “these two so that information is constantly arriving from the Web” allowing users, when additional information was needed, to “automatically be transported to it, rather than having to launch a browser and search for it.”²¹ As the personal computer became a comprehensive tool of communication and research, society’s reliance on the technology advanced dramatically. Americans capitalized on the Internet’s ability to provide viewers with easily accessible information. With the upcoming election, voters began turning to the emerging medium as a means to gather knowledge of political issues, and candidate platforms.

The 1998 election saw introductory web initiatives from a variety of candidates, and was proclaimed “the first to demonstrate the potential of the ‘e-campaign’.”²² Dal LaManga, a congressional candidate in New York, became the first politician with links from his corporate website to a campaign site. Ed Garvey, a Wisconsin gubernatorial hopeful, provided donor information and solicited contributions on his site. Running for a U.S. Senate seat from California, Barbara Boxer worked hard to integrate the Internet’s capabilities with her more traditional efforts. Boxer’s site mobilized voters to donate funds and send e-mails to supporters. However, her site embodied the limitations most candidates faced in 1998. Boxer gathered only 250 “Barbara Backers,” or registered online supporters and raised just \$10,000 online barely covering the cost of running the site. After five years on the net, Boxer had compiled an e-mail list of only 3,000 names, and her site averaged just one hundred “click throughs” a day. For all the web users who

²¹ Tim Jordan, *Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet* (New York: Routledge 1999), 125.

²² Hossein Bidgoli, ed., *The Internet Encyclopedia, Volume 3* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2004), 84.

viewed Boxer's banner ads while surfing the web, only 1 or 2 percent actually chose to click and enter. More successful was Jeb Bush, campaigning for governor in Florida. He ran a site that had almost two million hits during the 1998 election. This level of site traffic was impressive when compared to the number of visitors recorded on most candidate sites.²³ According to Toronto-based lawyer and political strategist Warren Kinsella, "soon every campaign, large or small, wanted a presence on the World Wide Web, and not just to smear people (as Matt Drudge had sought to do with Bill Clinton). Very quickly campaigns and war rooms saw how the Internet could secure, in great numbers, two highly elusive commodities – people and money."²⁴

The potential of on-site campaigning was clearly visible in 1998. Its inexpensive cost made it attractive to candidates without deep pockets and establishment connections. But it was in the unlikely candidacy of Jesse Ventura that the use of the medium changed how candidates interacted with voters.

Jesse Ventura was born Jim Janos on July 15, 1951 in Minnesota. He was raised in a military family, his father serving in the tank-destroyer division and his mother an

²³ Jeb Bush, "Making Government Work," *Innovations in E-Government: The Thoughts of Governors and Mayors* Erwin A. Blackstone, Michael L. Bognanno, and Simon Hakim, eds. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 113. Jeb Bush placed a large emphasis on his web site during the 1998 election, which likely caused the surge in viewers. He advocated the importance of Internet communication in government claiming, "our constituents expect service and convenience on par with what they have come to expect in the private-sector digital marketplace." During his term as governor he created MyFlorida.com, a site for residents that highlighted the state, its products, services, and local governments.

²⁴ William Booth, "More Politicians Use Web as Campaign Tool," *Washington Post* 17 October 1998, p. A1; Hossein Bidgoli, ed., *The Internet Encyclopedia, Volume 3*, 84; Warren Kinsella, *The War Room: Political Strategies for Business, NGOs, And Anyone Who Wants to Win* (Ontario: Canada Council for the Arts, 2007), 264; "Political Online Firsts," *E Politics Firsts*, Published by Politics Online: News, Tools, and Strategies. www.politicsonline.com/content/main/firsts/#1998. Accessed 8 October 2010.

army nurse. Ventura claims to have inherited his father's "genetic tendency toward independence," while his mother taught him and his brother to "stand on our own two feet, to think and do for ourselves, and not to be reliant on other people."²⁵ Ventura loved sports and competition. In his autobiography *I Ain't Got Time to Bleed: Reworking the Body Politic from the Bottom Up* he described the "Saturday-afternoon fights – Sixth-grade style," that he organized, which were set in "a makeshift 'ring'" in the Janos' basement. Looking back Ventura admits he never imagined the fights were a prelude to his career, but that they were "just the kind of thing you did for fun if you were a kid growing up on the South Side of Minneapolis, Minnesota."²⁶

At the height of the Vietnam War, Jim joined the Navy SEALs. His brother Jan was a SEAL, and when home on leave from Da Nang had warned Jim, "don't join the service. Stay home. Go to college. Have fun. Don't get involved in this war."²⁷ But, when Jim's grades kept him from attending college, he and a friend contacted a recruiter. The Navy was a challenge Jim could not ignore and he completed several tours of duty in Vietnam. After leaving the service, like so many soldiers, he had no clear plans. Following a brief stint in a California biker gang, he returned to Minnesota and enrolled in Hennipen Junior College where he shined primarily on the football field. At 6'5", 270 pounds, Janos attracted the attention of representatives from professional wrestling. His career as a wrestler quickly took off and he achieved notoriety as, "The Body."²⁸

²⁵ Jesse Ventura, *I Ain't Got Time to Bleed: Reworking the Body Politic From the Bottom Up* (New York: Signet, 1999), 55.

²⁶ Ibid., 53.

²⁷ Ibid., 76.

²⁸ Ibid., 78-80; Steve Slagle, "The Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame: Photos and Bios, The Stories Behind the Stars," *The Ring Chronicle* 2000.

Ventura's career in the ring ended in the mid-1980s when he experienced health problems and developed a potentially lethal blood clot. Some believed the beatings he endured in the ring caused the clots, but he claimed that his exposure to Agent Orange was more significant. After he could no longer wrestle, Ventura stayed with the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) and became a successful commentator. With a contract valued at close to a million dollars he became the highest paid man in wrestling. This helped launch an acting career. He had several parts in major films such as *Predator* and *The Running Man*. Ventura returned to Minnesota with his wife and children, a household name, in the late 1980s.²⁹

A clash with suburban town leaders turned Ventura from retirement. When the city of Brooklyn Park required Ventura and his neighbors to purchase gutters, storm sewers, and curbs to deal with flooding problems, he resisted. Ventura attended city council meetings and charged that land developers were in league with the authorities. Frustrated, he decided to run for office. Surprising doubters he won the mayor's office in 1991. When reflecting on the wrestler's time as mayor, resident Don Johnson told the *Duluth News-Tribune* that "critics were impressed with his quick grasp of city issues" and found that Ventura was "honest as the day is long, and just a nice guy."³⁰ That position gave him a platform for his run for the governor's chair in 1998.³¹

That year the Republican Party nominated Norman Coleman, St. Paul's mayor, for governor. As mayor, Coleman earned two "feathers in his cap," when he brought a

www.wrestlingmuseum.com/pages/wrestlers/jesseventura2.html. Accessed 31 October 2010.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Daniel Bernard, "Hoping to Put Common Sense into Practice Ventura Using Celebrity Smart," *Duluth News-Tribune*, 28 October 1998.

³¹ Ventura, *I Ain't Got Time to Bleed*, 55-60.

new National Hockey League franchise to the city and encouraged the state's largest software company to relocate to St. Paul from Minneapolis. The Democratic contender was the 46-year-old Hubert "Skip" H. Humphrey III. Humphrey came from a well-known political family. His father, Hubert Humphrey, was mayor of Minneapolis, served as a U.S. Senator, and was Lyndon Johnson's Vice President. In 1968, he ran for President and lost to Richard Nixon. The younger Humphrey followed his father's footsteps into Minnesota's Democratic Farmer-Labor Party and was elected state Attorney General in 1983. Attorney General Humphrey built a name in his own right. In *Minnesota vs. Phillip Morris* he took big tobacco to court and championed community interests. The case claimed that the tobacco industry "defrauded consumers and engaged in false advertising, deceptive practices, and anti-trust violations, including conspiracy to stifle development of safer cigarettes and to conceal information on smoking and health."³² The \$6.1 billion awarded went to help adults quit smoking, educate school age children about the dangers of smoking, initiate a statewide smoking ban, and reduce the state's budget deficit.³³

Ventura was clearly at a disadvantage from the start. He had little experience and no organization. Minnesota's campaign finance law also added to his woes. In 1974, the state implemented the Political Contribution Refund Program (PCRP) to encourage voter participation in the political process. Under its provisions, the state publicly funded campaigns, and in cases where candidates accept public funding, limited campaign

³² Hubert H. Humphrey III, "Winning Against Big Tobacco: Let's Take the Time to Get it Right," *Public Health Reports* 112 no. 5 (September-October 1997): 378.

³³ Ibid; Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, "Legislators Past and Present: Humphrey, III, Hubert H. 'Skip,'" www.leg.state.mn.us/legdb/fulldetail.asp?ID=10270. Accessed 28 October 2010; "The Twin Cities: Glaring Across the River," *The Economist* 30 October 1997.

spending. To participate in the program and receive a subsidy, candidates had to agree to inflation-adjusted spending limits and raise a percentage of their campaign funding up front. Candidates' subsidies reflected their party's showing in the most recent election and in the number of people who opted to allocate \$5 to the PCRP by checking a box on their state income tax return. In addition to offering established parties a lump sum for campaign use, the program called for the first \$50 of a campaign donation to be refunded to any voter who asked for reimbursement. For the 1998 gubernatorial race, Humphrey received \$603,544 and Coleman \$559,670 from the state program, direct results of their parties' showings in the 1996 election and their campaign efforts to raise the initial donations necessary to qualify for state funding. By July of 1998 Ventura had raised only twelve thousand dollars, less than half of what was needed to qualify.³⁴

Hubert Humphrey III and Norman Coleman rolled out complex campaign machines in 1998. Using previously established systems of block captains and regional directors, the Democratic and Republican parties were ready to navigate familiar waters, and expected to engage in a two-way race. Well financed and well known, they paid little heed to other contenders.³⁵

Phil Madsen, the founder of the Independence Party of Minnesota and the organizer of Ross Perot's presidential campaign in Minnesota in 1992, recalled the day Ventura's campaign officially got underway. In early February, 1998, two dozen members of the party gathered to brainstorm a plan for their candidate. Although they

³⁴ Frank and Wagner, "*We Shocked the World!*", 22-25. The campaign's t-shirt sales at the Minnesota state fair ultimately raised \$62,000, and allowed Ventura to qualify for a \$308,840 subsidy. However, Minnesota would not release the subsidy to Ventura until after he had won at least 5 percent of the vote.

³⁵ Telephone Interview with Phil Madsen, 12 October 2010.

had never successfully placed anyone in office, they saw opportunity in the charismatic and outspoken Jesse Ventura. Members of the party's inner circle had worked together before and knew each other's strengths and weaknesses. At the initial meeting, Phil Madsen convinced the group that Ventura's campaign could benefit from an Internet presence that would facilitate communication with voters while maximizing its budget. At the time, in addition to his work in Minnesota politics, Madsen was a software instructor. Aware of his campaign's financial disadvantages, Ventura agreed to the Internet undertaking and asked who would spearhead the efforts. Madsen mentioned his interest in learning the emerging technology. It was understood he would be the one to take Ventura to the World Wide Web. The campaign effort would not be run traditionally. Tasks would be fluid and titles held little meaning. This was a setting primed for innovation.³⁶

To begin the campaign's Internet undertaking, Madsen purchased Microsoft's FrontPage98 software. Created by Vermeer Technologies, FrontPage was a WYSIWYG HTML editor and website administration tool. Microsoft acquired Vermeer Technologies in 1996, and the FrontPage program was part of its operating system until 2003. As a WYSIWYG editor, FrontPage was "designed to hide the details of pages' HTML code from the user, making it possible for novices effortlessly to create web pages and sites."³⁷

Madsen's Internet based initiative was two-pronged consisting of a homepage and JesseNet, an electronic e-mail list that enabled direct and quick communication with

³⁶ Telephone Interview with Phil Madsen, 2 October 2010.

³⁷ Informer Technologies Incorporated Software.Informer, "Microsoft Office Front Page," <http://microsoft-office-frontpage.software.informer.com/wiki/>. Accessed 7 October 2010.

supporters. The JesseVentura.Org homepage was simple and embodied its designer's motto that "content trumps cosmetics."³⁸ It featured just two pictures, one of Ventura and the other of his running mate Mae Schunk. There were no graphics. Simple links allowed viewers to receive news about the campaign, buy t-shirts, donate funds, and sign up for the e-mail list. The site also encouraged viewers to print and share information via e-mail with as many friends as possible. JesseVentura.Org served three distinct purposes: to raise money, volunteers, and votes. The priority was to create a network that could compete with traditional Republican and Democratic electoral machines and efforts already in full swing. The Minneapolis-St. Paul based *Star Tribune* credited Ventura's Internet efforts with giving "the campaign something it was lacking in field organization."³⁹

Warren Kinsella described the design of Ventura's homepage: "Early on, Jesse decided the website would operate like a cul-de-sac and not a crossroads. The site would not be a place for people to arrive at and then exit via links we provided. Once people entered our site, we wanted them to stay and look around."⁴⁰ The site provided no links to external web resources ensuring that viewers spent the maximum time on the Ventura site. Its internal nature at the time was controversial, as it was rare not to link to other sites. Early in the campaign viewers considered five to seven pages during a visit to the website, but as the election neared, the site's activity increased dramatically. Viewers soon averaged nine to eleven pages per visit. In the final stage of the campaign,

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Tom Hamburger, "Ventura Campaign Tactics Captivate Washington Crowd," *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis-St. Paul), 2 December 1998, p. 6A.

⁴⁰ Kinsella, *The War Room: Political Strategies for Business, NGOs, And Anyone Who Wants to Win*, 263.

JesseVentura.Org offered visitors the opportunity to comment on its message board. Message board communication occurred almost instantaneously and was unprecedented.⁴¹

JesseNet was the other interactive online component of Ventura's campaign. The e-mail database connected to approximately 3,000 supporters, potential supporters, members of the press, and opponents. This cyber tactic was not new. In past elections, candidates had sent mass e-mails to voters. The Ventura team simply proved more innovative in distributing e-mails, using them to contact members and build its support base. JesseNet's ability to reach voters supplemented the work of volunteers who made telephone calls and went door to door. In his book, *Government 2.0: Using Technology to Improve Education, Cut Red Tape, Reduce Gridlock, and Enhance Democracy*, William D. Egger argues that JesseNet "replaced more traditional advance teams, mobilizing volunteers whenever Ventura thundered into town. With few computers in the campaign office, the campaign even used JesseNet to let volunteers do online data entry from their homes."⁴² In fact, the campaign's office in Minnesota was used more as a storefront to sell Jesse paraphernalia than as an organizational headquarters.⁴³

The online interaction made possible by JesseNet ignited popular excitement. As the campaign progressed, and members were able to follow the ex-wrestler's extravagant appearances online, they joined in campaign activities. Rather than produce passive supporters who only clicked their mice, men and women turned out to campaign rallies,

⁴¹ Ibid., 263-264; Madsen Interview, 12 October 2010.

⁴² William D. Egger, *Government 2.0: Using Technology to Improve Education, Cut Red Tape, Reduce Gridlock, and Enhance Democracy* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 162.

⁴³ Madsen Interviews, 2 and 12 October 2010.

donated to the campaign effort, and went door to door for their candidate in both real and cyber space.⁴⁴

The campaign's reliance on Internet technology grew quickly and without plan. The website was put in place and maintained, but the Ventura campaign spent little time analyzing its effectiveness. According to Madsen, the chaos that surrounded the fast-moving campaign made an evaluation of the website's use impossible. Ventura also remained dedicated to traditional campaign tactics including fundraising efforts at the Minnesota State Fair and speaking engagements. Still, Ventura's team had to embrace the Internet's communicative ability from necessity and capitalized on the attention it generated. Only in retrospect was its transformative power understood.⁴⁵

At first, critics struggled to take Ventura's candidacy seriously. For some, the ex-wrestler's outlandish personality, controversial comments, and flamboyant nature denied legitimacy. However Ventura's effort proved a serious challenge. During the election, he went head to head with Coleman and Humphrey, debating a variety of issues including abortion, gun control, and the role of government. These issues played out in both real and cyberspace. Ventura's speeches were echoed on his web page, and his web address was posted on speech podiums, t-shirts, bumper stickers, and in campaign literature. Ventura also mentioned his Internet initiative every time he appeared on television or radio airwaves.⁴⁶

On abortion, Ventura and Humphrey split from Coleman, both running pro-choice campaigns. Ventura specified that he would never choose abortion personally, but

⁴⁴ Madsen Interview, 12 October 2010.

⁴⁵ Madsen Interview, 2 October 2010.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

feared that making it illegal would “force women into garages and back alleys,” ultimately leaving “two lives in jeopardy.”⁴⁷ Ventura felt the government’s only place in the abortion debate was to prevent its outlaw. He advocated that “to stop abortion is to deal, philosophically and spiritually, with the people who get them. And that’s not something government can touch.”⁴⁸

Gun control became a hot campaign topic, especially in the rural areas of northern Minnesota, and the candidates varied on the issue. Coleman favored “making it easier for nonfelons to get permits to carry handguns.” Humphrey supported the state’s current law which in 1998 allowed “the sheriff or police chief to decide whether there is sufficient reason to issue a permit.”⁴⁹ Ventura considered himself “all for gun control,” so long as it adhered to his personal definition: “if you can put 2 rounds in the same hole from 25 meters, that’s gun control! If you’re going to own a gun, you have an obligation to know what you’re doing with it.” He argued that “when the Constitution gave us the right to bear arms, it also made us responsible for using them properly.” At the core of Ventura’s support for gun control was his belief that all citizens had the right to carry a weapon following a waiting period and training. When discussing the issues, *The Star Tribune* reported “Ventura was able to position himself as the candidate in the middle. He promised to neither expand government,” which many voters feared Humphrey would do or “oppose abortion and gay rights” as Coleman did. “Without a party of religious-right

⁴⁷ Jesse Ventura Quote, www.iwise.com/vLjh8. Accessed 29 October 2010.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

and business interests to tug on him,” voters felt that Ventura’s positions would not change with the political winds.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, JesseNet e-mails relayed news of campaign fundraising events, mobilized members, and gave Ventura the opportunity to respond directly to criticism made against him in the press. In addition to offering voters a detailed account of his stand on major issues, the most notable use of the e-mail database to counter media coverage occurred when Ventura suggested that legislation regarding the legalization of prostitution and marijuana be considered in Minnesota. The press and his opponents jumped on the story and reported that Ventura was an advocate of legalized prostitution. Within hours, the campaign launched a mass e-mail message clarifying Ventura’s stance. The e-mail specified that “Ventura did not think legalization of prostitution and marijuana is good but that the idea should receive thought and reflection.”⁵¹ Without media filter or fear that his comments would appear on newspaper back pages, Ventura had a critical tool he could use to influence voter sentiment.⁵²

JesseVentura.Org became the ideal forum where voters could participate in Ventura’s evolving, colorful, and nontraditional campaign. It made the ex-wrestler accessible to voters, engaged his supporters, and bypassed critics who attempted to manipulate his message. Early in the campaign, Ventura’s camp made the critical decision to post his position papers online. At the time, the biographically focused websites of political candidates rarely posted such detailed information. Ventura not only put his policy papers on the Internet but his campaign contacted everyone on its e-mail

⁵⁰ Jesse Ventura Quote, www.iwise.com/HFWKW. Accessed 29 October 2010; “The Ventura Vote,” *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis-St. Paul), 8 November 1998 p. 26A.

⁵¹ Stephen I. Frank and Steven C. Wagner, *“We Shocked the World!”* 26.

⁵² Ibid.

list and encouraged them to read about the issues. This type of web activity allowed Ventura to offer voters his unmediated views and invited them to learn about his off-center political opinions in his own words. Ventura's internet-based communication with voters promoted his image as an innovative maverick who spoke honestly and sensibly on the issues, to the people. In Ventura, Internet users had discovered the people's champion. According to website coordinator Phil Madsen, the site's up-front and frequent communication with voters made Ventura a legitimate contender. The site had two million hits between February and November of 1998, 75 percent of which came in the last three weeks of the campaign.⁵³

When viewers clicked on the site's 'contact' hyperlink, they were invited to e-mail their support and concerns to their candidate. Perhaps his technologically - savvy campaign softened his image and made him more palatable to moderates. Steven Clift, the chairman of Minnesota E-Democracy, considered the Internet "the nervous system of Ventura's campaign"⁵⁴ and called the candidate "Jesse 'The Wonk' Ventura, referring to the large amount of public policy information on his web site." As the election neared "the issues pages of the site were second only to Jesse's biography in popularity," and "reporters and pundits frequently referred to and quoted from Jesse's public policy positions as stated on his web site."⁵⁵

⁵³ Kinsella, *The War Room*, 263-264.

⁵⁴ Arianna Huffington, "Internet a Factor in Ventura Victory," *Omaha World-Herald* 13 November 1998, p.25.

⁵⁵ Steven Clift, "Inside Story on Governor-Elect Ventura's Internet Campaign Use," *Democracies Online Newswire: E-Democracy.Org* (December 10, 1998). <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/do-wire/message/107>. Accessed 7 November 2010; Peter Ferdinand ed., *The Internet, Democracy and Democratization* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000), 56.

The most important issue, especially in the final stages of the election, proved to be Ventura himself. His nontraditional campaign capitalized on “his outsider status.”⁵⁶ The *Washington Post* reported that “The Body has added a heavy dose of testosterone to Minnesota’s governor’s race, transforming an otherwise dull gubernatorial campaign into one of the most colorful – and suspenseful – in the nation.”⁵⁷ When asked about Ventura’s influence on the campaign, Steven Schier, a political scientist at Carleton College, commented “I think people are fed up with politics and Jesse is the only authentic working-class candidate in the race,” and argued that politics had “become more and more about entertainment....Jesse doesn’t offer a lot of specifics but his is essentially a campaign built around a personality and in this volatile political atmosphere, it’s working.”⁵⁸ The *Star Tribune* added, “Ventura’s popularity demonstrates,” that “our culture has an enduring appetite for the political sideshow, for campaigns as entertainment.”⁵⁹

On October 20, 1998 the *Star Tribune* reported the race was “a dead heat.” When his support jumped 10 percentage points in September, he closed in on the popularity “of the other two candidates for the first time.” The three-way gubernatorial campaign “once considered a yawner” had suddenly “become a squeaker.” The newspaper placed Ventura’s actions at the center of the changing campaign polls claiming that “much of the

⁵⁶ Patrick Sweeney, “Ventura Ready to Beat the Odds//Common Touch Helps Propel Strong Spike in Opinion Surveys,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 28 October 1998, p.1A.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ “Jess’s National Splash: It’s Been Fun, but the Election’s Near,” *Star Tribune* (Minnesota-St. Paul), 30 October 1998 p. 26A.

shift has to do with Ventura.”⁶⁰ In the election coverage, the *Duluth News-Tribune* reported that even Republican and DFL party members admitted “that Ventura’s feisty presence raised the interest level.” He had not run a television advertisement, but his “theatrical flair and plain talk” made him a debate favorite.⁶¹

As the possibility of victory grew, maximum Ventura exposure in the last seventy-two hours became critical. The campaign needed to inspire people, get the word out, and bring campaign efforts to the highest pitch. Ventura’s managers in a brilliant move, conceived a traditional barnstorming “Drive to Victory Tour.” Ventura driving an R.V. camper would cruise from town to town, igniting campaign momentum. Yet, what made the caravan historic was its utilization of emerging Internet technologies. In this final challenge, JesseNet excelled and brought candidate – voter interaction to a new level. JesseNet’s message board made instantaneous communication between voters and candidate possible, and the campaign’s increased uploading capacity made the sharing of photographs a new means of generating online communities. Here the Internet played a critical role in Ventura’s victory over Humphrey and Coleman.

The campaign embarked on the “Drive to Victory” with only a vague plan of action. Often called “the general” because of his military background, Phil Madsen was chosen to coordinate the details, and while mowing his lawn found inspiration and outlined the tour on a notepad he kept in his pocket. The campaign set the general direction of the caravan, but the exact schedule depended upon voter reaction. How

⁶⁰ Robert Whereatt, “Suddenly, It’s a Dead Heat,” *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis-St. Paul), 19 October 1998 p. 01A. Statistics gathered by a *Star Tribune* poll of 806 likely voters from all over Minnesota. The poll was conducted between October 15th and 18th, 1998.

⁶¹ Chuck Frederick, “Ventura’s Star Power Pulls ‘Em To The Polls ‘Rassler’ Gets Northlanders Pumped For Election,” *Duluth News-Tribune*, 4 November 1998.

many supporters came to meet and rally with Ventura determined a large part of the initial schedule. The first e-mail announcing the tour offered a brief explanation of Ventura's stops, but asked people to tune into the website and watch JesseNet notifications daily to find out where and when they could meet their candidate. Even the media relied on the website's updates to track Ventura. During the tour, the *Duluth News Tribune* informed readers that Ventura would be visiting the Hibbing, Virginia, and Duluth areas, but that specific "times aren't set yet," and for rally information to "check the Reform Party candidate's Web site at www.jesseventura.org."⁶² According to reporter Tom Hauser, the idea was that "during the tour the Jesse Ventura website," would be "live, highly interactive, twenty-four hours a day."⁶³

An e-mail message sent on October 30, 1998 to JesseNet supporters asked them to meet at the KTCA-TV news station following the final debate to see Jesse off. It called on them to "show your support for Jesse and Mae by adding your vehicle to the caravan as we go from town to town."⁶⁴ Ventura touted it as the "Get Out the Vote Tour." At the opening rally Ventura told gathered supporters that a vote for Jesse Ventura was not a wasted vote, but rather "'a vote for Jesse and nobody else!'"⁶⁵ Hauser labeled the effort a cyber-drive that was "a decidedly cutting-edge, off-the-wall multimedia campaign that

⁶² "Candidates See Different Roles for State Auditor" *Duluth News-Tribune*, 1 November 1998.

⁶³ Tom Hauser, *Inside the Ropes with Jesse Ventura*, 21.

⁶⁴ E-mail forwarded from Stephen Clift of Democracies Online. DO-WIRE archives. Democracies online newswire message. www.lists.umn.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9810&L=do-wire&P=1374. Accessed 23 September 2010.

⁶⁵ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes with Jesse Ventura*, 24.

will become the talk of the nation.”⁶⁶ In creating a spectacle in both real and cyberspace, the tour sparked voter energy and surely drove escalating participation.

The tour stopped at four bars in the St. Paul metropolitan area the first night. Jesse spent between twenty and thirty minutes at each location, then was back on the road. Saturday the 31st, the caravan headed to the Anoka/St. Cloud area, and Sunday the 1st of November it toured southern Minnesota. While in western Minnesota, the tour stopped at the home of a volunteer who had offered to let Ventura use his computer to reach voters via the website’s message board. Ventura spent fifteen minutes chatting online with supporters from the volunteer’s living room. This Internet correspondence from the road spotlighted the campaign’s technological assets. The stop was brief, and only happened once, but it was a first in candidate-voter interaction. Looking back, Madsen called Ventura’s message board “as high tech as you could get.”⁶⁷

The ability to communicate with supporters during the tour increased crowd turnout. At one point in western Minnesota the caravan fell significantly behind schedule. At the American Legion hall in Lynchfield, a group of seventy-five to one hundred people had gathered to rally with the gubernatorial hopeful. Though the caravan was late, Internet communication with Ventura’s RV kept the crowd informed and patient and Jesse eventually arrived to crowd applause and high spirits. For Madsen, this experience showcased the way Internet communication had redefined the election process. Close interaction between candidate and supporters was essential in building and maintaining enthusiasm and allegiance.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁷ Madsen Interview, 12 October 2010.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

The tour presented another opportunity to take the campaign's Internet use to the next level. Jesse's "geek squad," a group of techies on the caravan, took photos of people who congregated along the route. After each rally they uploaded the photos to Ventura's website, which created excitement and caused crowds to grow. Soon, additional equipment was needed to capture and transmit campaign images. Campaign coordinators had opened new territory, and when soliciting assistance told volunteers that everything would "have to be coordinated on the fly."⁶⁹ Supporters came forward and donated their digital cameras and computers. The increased volume and quality of uploaded images allowed supporters to see themselves online when they returned home from rallies. Instant recognition and gratification increased the zeal surrounding the techno campaign.⁷⁰

JesseNet asked supporters to center their enthusiasm at the rallies. The e-mail sent on October 30, 1998 humorously reminded members that there would be "no drinking and driving if you are with us on the caravan." It would not do Ventura's image well if his people were arrested during the tour. At the same time, the campaign enabled volunteers to take charge by trusting them "to immediately report any caravan participant who is observed drinking and driving." The e-mail playfully concluded by telling JesseNet members that if they did get in trouble they should "see what you can do to get your arresting officer and detox cell mates to vote for Jesse on Tuesday!"⁷¹ The e-mail embodied the direct, yet casual nature of JesseNet communication. The technology

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ E-mail forwarded from Stephen Clift of Democracies Online. DO-WIRE archives. Democracies online newswire message, www.lists.umn.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9810&L=do-wire&P=1374. Accessed 23 September 2010.

reached voters and set the campaign tone. The personal touch of the message drew supporters to the cause and the man. After meeting the candidate during a tour stop in Albert Lea, retired deputy sheriff Kyle Olson, told the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* Ventura was “down to earth,” and “the type of guy who says what he thinks, and he doesn’t make big promises.”⁷²

This creative campaign technique gave voters control of their election experience. They logged on from the comfort of their homes and followed Ventura. JesseNet messages reminded voters that even if they could not physically be with him on the tour, they remained a critical part of his efforts. Every visit to the site was an opportunity to connect with a broader community. People who attended rallies did not simply cheer as the “Drive to Victory” van drove past. The Timberwolves jacket clad ex-wrestler, puffing on his cigar, became a friend they joined in his crusade.⁷³

If Minnesota’s campaign finance laws had initially frustrated the Ventura campaign, the state’s voter registration regulations played into the wrestler’s surge in the last days of the election. In Minnesota, citizens could register by mail up to twenty days before an election. Additionally, party representatives and candidates could go door-to-door distributing voter registration forms. Voters could also sign up when applying for a

⁷² Jim Ragsdale, Patrick Sweeney, and Jack B. Coffman, “Road Shows Crisscross State//Candidates Make Final Pleas, Restating Campaign Themes,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 2 November 1998, p.1A.

⁷³ Madsen Interview, 2 October 2010; When researching the “Drive to Victory” an attempt was made to examine papers from smaller towns in Minnesota. However, there are almost no online archives dating before 2000, and in 1998 most of these papers published weekly. Because the tour took place in the last seventy-two hours before the election, coverage was overshadowed by election outcomes. As a result of limited funding, Ventura focused his campaign efforts in the twin-cities, and coverage of the “Drive to Victory Tour” outside that region, and Duluth, was difficult to document in the newspaper.

driver's license or paying taxes and college tuition. Most importantly, individuals with proof of residence, or with someone simply willing to attest to their residency, could register on Election Day. Absentee ballots in Minnesota were sent to prison inmates convicted of misdemeanors, and to all other citizens. With 85 percent of its eligible electorate registered to vote in 1998, and 61% participating, the state's turnout ranked among the highest in the nation.⁷⁴

The election was close. Ventura ultimately won 37 percent of the vote, Coleman 34 percent, and Humphrey finished with 29 percent. While Ventura's 3 percent was a close margin of victory, he only lost one county in the one-hundred-mile radius surrounding St. Paul and Minneapolis. The *Duluth News-Tribune* declared "He dominated that state's so-called Golden Crescent – the Twin Cities, its suburbs, and the rapidly growing areas of St. Cloud and Rochester," where he focused a great deal of his efforts during the "Drive to Victory Tour."⁷⁵ Younger voters came out in favor of Ventura; he won 46 percent of the votes from those under the age of twenty-nine years. Most supporters admitted that they were attracted by Ventura's charisma. The *Star Tribune* captured the image that Ventura's campaign marketed, reporting that "he's funny, he's bold, he takes nothing too seriously."⁷⁶ According to exit polls conducted by the Minnesota Office of the Secretary of the State, 16 percent of voters who participated

⁷⁴ Frank and Wagner, "*We Shocked The World*," 6-7.

⁷⁵ Craig Lincoln, "Ventura Drew Voters to Polls, Away From Other Candidates," *Duluth News-Tribune*, 5 November 1998.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 29-33; "Jesse's National Splash, It's Been Fun but the Election's Near," *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis-St. Paul), 30 October 1998 p. 26A.

in the election registered on November 2nd, and of that 16 percent, three out of four backed Ventura.⁷⁷

Why did Ventura win? In *“We Shocked the World”: A Case Study of Jesse Ventura’s Election as Governor of Minnesota* Stephen I. Frank and Steven C. Wagner argued that “Ventura should not have had a chance to win the election.”⁷⁸ He faced an uphill battle against well-established and well-financed opponents. Discussing the reasons for his win, Ventura suggested he had a “secret weapon.” Unlike Humphrey and Coleman, Ventura counted on “the people who had never participated in the system before, and a huge number of these new voters were college-age people.”⁷⁹ According to Ventura, his “Democratic opponent Hubert H. (Skip) Humphrey III, called our victory a ‘wake up call of the first order’. Even my Republican opponent, St. Paul Mayor Norm Coleman, said that we ignited a spark, even though he said he didn’t have any idea what that spark was. They knew I was popular, but neither of them had any idea how I won.”⁸⁰

Observers credit Minnesota’s political environment and Ventura’s charisma for his win. But key to his victory was a campaign that was opportunistic, flexible, and open to innovation. These characteristics were apparent in its use of the Internet. Lacking funding and party machinery, the maverick was drawn to online campaigning. When looking at the techno-based components of the campaign it is clear that Ventura’s team did not invent Internet technologies. Rather, it used established innovations creatively “in a recipe that others had not.”⁸¹ It was that recipe that had political operatives talking

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Stephen I. Frank and Steven C. Wagner, *“We Shocked the World,”* 10.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ventura, *I Ain’t Got Time to Bleed*, 5.

⁸¹ Madsen Interview, 12 October 2010.

following the ex-wrestler's historic victory. What they saw was a campaign that used the Internet to bring people into politics in new and innovative ways. JesseNet and JesseVentura.Org created a community of believers and introduced an unprecedented interaction between candidate and voters. It would be something that they would be eager to copy. And, at relatively little cost. In all, Ventura's campaign raised and spent only \$600,000. This compared to the combined fifteen million dollars raised by Coleman and Humphrey.⁸²

The significance of Ventura's campaign was soon apparent. Immediately after the election, Phil Madsen was asked to attend a meeting at Harvard University. Attendees focused on Internet campaigning during the interim elections and spotlighted Jesse Ventura's underdog victory. Three months later, in March 1999, NBC's *Nightly News* with Tom Brokaw did a story on campaign innovation. At one point in the broadcast Brokaw showed a split screen featuring three photographs. The first two were of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy. The unlikely third face was that of Jesse "The Body" Ventura. Brokaw's story placed Ventura alongside two of history's most notable political pioneers. As Roosevelt had crafted his message for the radio, and Kennedy dominated 1960s political television, Ventura had made the Internet a tool of campaign strategy. Even Phil Madsen, when seeing the story air on television, was stunned by this recognition of his role in political history.⁸³

What Phil Madsen did in 1998 cannot be replicated today. Laws regulating information obtained, transferred, and received via the Internet had not yet been written. Ventura and his managers had worked in uncharted waters, and were free to navigate to

⁸² Ibid; Madsen Interview, 2 October 2010.

⁸³ Madsen Interview, 2 October 2010.

the best of their ability.⁸⁴ Yet, as Madsen emphatically states with conventional wisdom, it is hard to imagine a political campaign today without an interactive Internet component. “A campaign without the Internet,” he notes, “is not a campaign at all.”⁸⁵

Howard Dean’s run for President in 2004 is often recognized as the first use of Internet campaigning to generate funds and attention sufficient to influence an election. However Madsen, when asked about Ventura’s successor, points not to Dean, but to John McCain’s presidential bid in 2000. By the 2000 presidential election, most candidates had established an Internet presence. Max Fose, John McCain’s Internet Webmaster, designed a highly effective fund-raising machine for the presidential hopeful. In what *Forbes* magazine called the “damnedest political exercise the year 2000 campaign will likely produce,” the McCain web site raised approximately \$30,000 in an hour in May of 2000. The donors whom the magazine described as “a distinct, Internet-enabled constituency,” contributed between \$10 and \$250 each and represented “a new way of doing politics.”⁸⁶ The campaign’s ability to receive “instantly exploitable Visa, AmEx, and Mastercard electronic cash,” in high volumes was impressive and represented the next step in the evolution of Internet politics. In the four days following the New Hampshire primary, McCain raised \$2 million dollars online, and his “secret list,” which served as an interactive strategy for organizing followers, grew to include 142,000 names and e-mail addresses.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Madsen Interview, 2 October 2010.

⁸⁵ Madsen Interview, 12 October 2010.

⁸⁶ Richard Rapaport, “Net vs. Norm,” *Forbes* 29 May 2000.
www.forbes.com/asap/2000/0529/053_print.html. Accessed 1 November 2010.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

McCain's webmaster had looked to the Ventura campaign for inspiration. McCain rode the cyber-momentum began by Ventura and transformed its Internet efforts into an even more influential campaign component. McCain made his Internet coordinator a key player on the strategic team, giving him both a fundraising manager and a chief of staff. According to *Forbes* magazine's Richard Rapaport, McCain used his Internet effort to "enlist phone bankers from all over the country to download voter lists in upcoming primary states and then to make calls from their homes." As a result "hundreds of thousands were reached at virtually no cost, compared to the going rate of 50 cents for every call from a professional phone bank. The Web became a virtual political print shop enabling thousands of volunteers to download and reproduce millions of pieces of campaign literature and signs on their home printers."⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

The Internet-based campaigns of 2004 drew much attention and were heralded as the beginning of a technological revolution. But, savvy individuals who used new technologies to transform communication between candidate and voter had already marked the path. Beginning with the E-Democracy debates in 1994, and progressing through Clinton and Gore's efforts in 1996, the introductory age of political Internet technology reached new heights with Jesse Ventura's unprecedented use of the medium. His web site's cul-de-sac design optimized the candidate's exposure to online viewers and JesseNet normalized frequent candidate-voter communication. From there, candidates such as John McCain, Howard Dean, and even Barack Obama continued to perfect the digital medium's ability to transform politics. The story of techno-political fusion reveals an American political system always evolving and adapting in an ever-changing environment. In this history, an unlikely "wrestler-turned-actor-turned-radio-talk-show-host," plays a leading role.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes with Jesse Ventura*, 1.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Newspapers:

Duluth News-Tribune.

Omaha World-Herald.

Star Tribune (Minneapolis-St. Paul).

St. Paul Pioneer Press.

The Washington Post.

Interviews:

Madsen, Phil. Telephone Interview by Amy Yag. 2 October 2010.

Madsen, Phil. Telephone Interview by Amy Yag. 12 October 2010.

Websites:

Clift, Steven. "Inside Story on Governor-Elect Ventura's Internet Campaign Use."
Democracies Online Newswire: E-Democracy. Org (1998). [http://groups.
Yahoo.com/group/do-wire/message/107](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/do-wire/message/107). (accessed November 7, 2010).

E Politics Firsts. "Political Online Firsts." *Politics Online: News, Tools, and Strategies*.
<http://www.politicsonline.com/content/main/firsts#1998>. (accessed October 8,
2010).

Informer Technologies Incorporated Software. Informer. "Microsoft Office Front Page."
<http://microsoft-office-frontpage.software.informer.com/wiki/>. (accessed
October 7, 2010).

"Jesse Ventura Quote." <http://www.iwise.com/vLjh8>. (accessed October 29, 2010).

Minnesota Legislative Reference Library. "Legislators Past and Present: Humphrey, III,
Hubert H. 'Skip.'" <http://www.leg.state.mn.us/legdb/fulldetail.asp?ID=10270>.
(accessed October 28, 2010).

“Remarks by Vice-President Al Gore at the Unveiling of the Clinton/Gore '96 Website.” <http://www.4President.us/websites/1996/clintongore1996website.html>. (accessed September 24, 2010).

Government Documents:

U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration: Bureau of the Census. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000*, 2000.

Books:

Abramson, Paul R., John H. Aldrich, and David W. Ronde. *Change and Continuity in the 1996 and 1998 Elections*. Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1999.

Bidgoli, Hossein, ed. *The Internet Encyclopedia, Volume 3*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2004.

Bimber, Bruce, and Richard Davis. *Campaigning Online: The Internet in U.S. Elections*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Browning, Graeme, and Daniel J. Weitzner, eds. *Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Influence American Politics*. Medford, New Jersey: Cyber Age Books, 1996.

Bush, Jeb. “Making Government Work.” *Innovations in E-Government: The Thoughts of Governors and Mayors*. Erwin A. Blackstone, Michael L. Bognanno, and Simon Hakim, eds. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005.

Dine, Philip. *State of the Unions: How Labor Can Strengthen the Middle Class, Improve Our Economy, and Regain Political Influence*. New York: McGraw Hill Publishing, 2007.

Edsall, Thomas Byrne, and Mary D. Edsall. *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992.

Egger, William D. *Government 2.0: Using Technology to Improve Education, Cut Red Tape, Reduce Gridlock, and Enhance Democracy*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005.

Ferdinand, Peter, ed. *The Internet, Democracy and Democratization*. London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000.

Frank, Stephen I., and Steven C. Wagner. “We Shocked the World!”: *A Case Study of Jesse Ventura’s Election as Governor of Minnesota*. New York: Harcourt College

- Publishers, 1999.
- Hauser, Tom. *Inside the Ropes with Jesse Ventura*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Humphrey, Hubert H. "Winning Against Big Tobacco: Let's Take the Time to Get it Right." *Public Health Reports* 112 (1997): 378.
- Jordan, Tim. *Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Kinsella, Warren. *The War Room: Political Strategies for Business, NGOs, and Anyone Who Wants to Win*. Ontario: Canada Council for the Arts, 2007.
- McWilliams, Wilson Carey. *Beyond the Politics of Disappointment? American Elections, 1980-1998*. New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2000.
- Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.
- Teachout, Zephyr, and Thomas Streeter, et al. *Mousepads, Shoe Leather, and Hope: Lessons from the Howard Dean Campaign for the Future of Internet Politics*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008.
- Ventura, Jesse. *I Ain't Got Time to Bleed: Reworking the Body Politic From the Bottom Up*. New York: Signet, 1999.

Articles:

- Aikens, G. Scott. "A History of Minnesota Electronic Democracy 1994." *First Monday Peer Reviewed Journal on the Internet* 1 (1996), <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/494/415> (accessed September 10, 2010).
- Benoit, William L., and Pamela J. Benoit. "The Virtual Campaign: Presidential Primary Websites in Campaign 2000." <http://www.acjournal.org/holdings/v013/1553/Rogue4/benoit.html>. (accessed September 24, 2010).
- Best, Samuel J., and Brian S. Krueger. "Analyzing the Representativeness of Internet Political Participation." *Political Behavior* 27 (2005): 183-216, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4500191> (accessed September 12, 2010).
- Herrnson, Paul S., Atiya Kai Stokes-Brown, and Matthew Hindman. "Campaign Politics and the Digital Divide: Constituency Characteristics, Strategic Considerations, and Candidate Internet Use in State Legislative Elections." *Political Research Quarterly* 60 (2007): 31-42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4623805> (accessed

- October 1, 2010).
- Howard, Philip N. "Deep Democracy, Thin Citizenship: The Impact of Digital Media in Political Campaign Strategy." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 597 (2005): 153-170, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25046067> (accessed August 25, 2010).
- Lacy, Dean, and Quin Monson. "The Origins and Impact of Votes for Third-Party Candidates: A Case Study of the 1998 Minnesota Gubernatorial Election." *Political Research Quarterly* 55 (2002): 409-437, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3088052> (accessed September 20, 2010).
- Rapaport, Richard. "Net vs. Norm." *Forbes*, May 29, 2000, <http://www.forbes.com/asap/2000/0529/053.html> (accessed October 12, 2010).
- Slagle, Steve. "The Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame: Photos and Bios, The Stories Behind the Stars." *The Ring Chronicle* (2000). <http://www.wrestlingmuseum.com/pages/wrestlers/jesseventura2.html>. (accessed October 31, 2010).
- Sobieraj, Sarah, and Deborah White. "Taxing Political Life: Reevaluating the Relationship Between Voluntary Association Membership, Political Engagement and the State." *The Sociological Quarterly* 45 (2004): 739-764, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4121208> (accessed September 5, 2010).
- "The Twin Cities: Glaring Across the River." *The Economist*, October 30, 1997, <http://rss.economist.com/node/104375> (accessed November 2, 2010).